

“The global re-mediation of religion”

**Panel presentation: “Global flows of media, people and culture.”
Global Studies Consortium Meeting, Melbourne, 13-17 June, 2012.**

**Professor Peter Horsfield
RMIT University**

Even as recently as a decade ago, it was widely considered in academic quarters that religion had all but disappeared as a social phenomenon and wasn't worthy of serious research or policy consideration. Today, religion is now widely considered—for better or worse—as being ‘back’ as a globally significant social, political, economic, and cultural force (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 2009).

While most academic research today focuses largely on the political dimensions of this significant social change, this resurgence of religion is characterised by more than just traditional religions or religious institutions flexing their muscles or reasserting their influence within the various social spaces allocated to them by so-called secularised societies. It reflects a significant crossing of the previously defined sacred-secular divide in an eclectic reworking of traditional, non-traditional, commercial, and individual religious symbolisations, values, meanings, and practices within the public media marketplace. The phenomena manifesting this changing marketplace are widespread, reflecting both institutional and de-institutionalised activity. Let me identify a couple of them.

Religious entrepreneurship and the building of media audiences

Religious entrepreneurs across the world – some linked with religious institutions, some not - are using new media effectively to bypass traditional religious institutional constraints and national boundaries to build new global audiences by competing directly in the media market, with packages of branded religious and secular content that ignore old religious loyalties and sensibilities and cross previously defined boundaries of sacred and secular. The success and influence of the Egyptian broadcast entrepreneur, Amr Khalid is a good example of this (Gauthier & Uhl, 2012).

Eclectic experimentations.

Online and social media technologies are offering opportunities for globally networked eclectic experimentations with religious and spiritual themes, producing new hybridisations of religious ideas and practices with secular contexts, symbols and narratives (Kirby, 2012).

Commercial religion

Regardless of their own faith or non-faith opinions or commitments, commercial media organisations are producing innovative religious or spiritual products to capitalise on what they perceive as a significant emerging commercial market niche (Clark, 2003).

Religious music

Contemporary Christian music and singers are crossing the previously relatively clear demarcations between religious and secular popular music, and between worship and commercial performance contexts. Hillsong, the Pentecostal congregation begun in Sydney in 1983, now has 25,000 members gathering each

week at its various services around Australia. As a global network, Hillsong churches are found in London, Kiev, Cape Town, Stockholm, Paris, Moscow, New York City, and Konstanz, Germany. Much of its success has been built on popular music. Its annual conference in Sydney draws in excess of 28,000 people, while its annual conference in London draws about 16,000 people to London's O2 Arena (Riches & Wagner, 2012). The winner of the first Australian Idol competition, Guy Sebastian, made explicit his Pentecostal Christianity and won Australian Idol by singing gospel songs. He has gone on to hold the record for having the most number one singles for an Australian male artist in Australian music history, with 30 platinum and two gold records.

Changes in religious authority

Old frames of institution-based religious authority and order are giving way to market appeal based on charisma, the attraction and maintenance of audiences, the management of brand, and the generation of strongly competitive religious material of general consumer value—ideology, image, community, sensation, solutions, and products.

Religion as a political force

In post-colonial and emerging economy contexts, religion has re-emerged as a unifying ideology for a range of social and political actions designed to facilitate access or resistance by local communities to the re-colonising power of global capitalism and Western consumer culture. One aspect of this is political and terrorist action where religion serves as an alternative ideology for cohering and maintaining sacrificial political action (Aly, 2009, 2012).

Reworking of religion and economic prosperity

Another aspect, almost at the other end of the spectrum, is the quickly spreading religious prosperity movements that are developing and building vibrant globally networked, gathered communities and media audiences around a gospel of wealth creation in which God manipulates the global capitalist system to make faithful individuals more healthy and wealthy (Coleman, 2000; Yang, 2005). With extensive international networking between groups of like mind across northern and southern hemispheres, a new form of religious exchange globalisation is emerging that gives God a good hand in this religious transfer of wealth. As Meagher notes in her study, Africa's informal economy accounts for 42% of GDP, with a large proportion of that now generated by the religious sector. International transfers from global religious networks into Africa through the informal sector now exceed current aid flows (Meagher, 2009, p. 407). Spirituality may well be one of Africa's significant exports.

Some see this resurgence of religion within the old secular framework of a renewed contest between science and superstition, reason and faith, and seek to construct and argue it in that way (e.g., Dawkins, 2006). For others, however, the level, character, and location of this resurgent religious activity prompt the need to rethink the social and intellectual boundaries by which religion has been defined, understood, and socially managed throughout the modern period. One of the implications may well be to do away with the old sacred-secular division by which such phenomena were understood, and to look for a more inclusive concept of enchantment to explore what is going on with what Partridge (2004) identifies as 'the gradual and uneven emergence of personally and socially consequential alternative spiritualities' (p. 58). So you have French philosopher André Comte-Sponville (2008), for one, arguing for the prospect of an atheist spirituality, one that sees material life in its fullness as having non-material numinous dimensions, that religion has previously colonized but which deserve alternative, non-religious engagement and conceptualisation.

Media has everything to do with these changes. Far from being simply an aspect of the nature of religious change, the changes taking place in global religion and global social religiosity are intimately connected with the new opportunities created by new media technologies for people to revisit and rework those previously discounted dimensions of human experience connected with transcendence, metaphysics, mystery, and enchantment – and their social, political and economic significance and relevance.

References

- Aly, A. (2009). The Terrorists' Audience: A Model of Internet Radicalisation. *Journal of Professional Intelligence Officers*, 17(1), 3-19.
- Aly, A. (2012). An audience-focused approach to examining religious extremism online. *Australian Journal of Communication*, 39(1), 1-16.
- Gauthier, F., & Uhl, M. (2012). Digital shapings of religion in a globalised world: The Vatican Online and Amr Khaled's TV-preaching. *Australian Journal of Communication*, 39(1), 53-72.
- Kirby, D. (2012). Readers, believers, consumers, and audiences: Complicating the relationship between consumption and contemporary narrative spiritualities. *Australian Journal of Communication*, 39(1), 121-134.
- Micklethwait, J., & Wooldridge, A. (2009). *God is back: how the global revival of faith is changing the world*. New York: The Penguin Press.
- Riches, T., & Wagner, T. (2012). The evolution of Hillsong Music: From Australian Pentecostal congregation into global brand. *Australian Journal of Communication*, 39(1), 17-36.